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Brian Tillesen  
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FAIRY FORTS AND THE BANSHEE IN MODERN COASTAL SLIGO, IRELAND  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF LOCAL BELIEFS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THESE TRADITIONS

by

BRIAN ROBERT TILLESEN  
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Anthropology  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
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Summer Term  
2010

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines issues of cultural identity and modernity, and the anthropology of spirituality and sacred sites by conducting ethnographic research on fairy beliefs in contemporary Ireland. Irish folk belief has traditionally identified a spirit world intertwined with our own which is inhabited by spirits, often collectively referred to as fairies. Belief in these spirits was once widespread. My research sought to determine the prevalence of these traditional beliefs among modern Irish people within my research area, as well as differences in belief across variables including age, gender, and religious preference.

I conducted eight weeks of ethnographic fieldwork during June-August 2008 in and around Sligo Town in County Sligo, Ireland. I selected County Sligo as a research site because it is a sparsely populated, largely rural area, identified in an earlier major study of Irish folklore as a region where belief in the Irish spirit world persisted more strongly than in other parts of the country. My primary research methodology was to conduct structured and unstructured interviews, complemented by visual site surveys. In the preparation of this thesis I utilized data from 52 Sligo residents plus ten other visitors to the area from surrounding Irish counties.

While my research suggests that few Sligo residents from the project area continue to believe in the literal existence of fairies, it also shows a much more common belief in a “power” associated with sites identified as “fairy forts,” which are natural features of the landscape or the remains of ancient burials or dwellings apocryphally endowed by folk tradition with supernatural or mysterious energies. These beliefs led to a taboo against intruding on, altering, or destroying these “forts” that is still very much alive today. Additionally I was able to discuss at length the

subject of the Irish death-herald spirit called the banshee (*bean sidhe*) with several study participants. Although it can be classified under the umbrella label of “fairy”, my research indicates that the banshee is seen as a stand-apart element of Irish tradition by research area residents, and is believed in by those who do not otherwise profess a belief in “fairies” in general.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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A special acknowledgment is due to Professor Elayne Zorn for chairing my thesis committee and providing indispensable advice on my writing and editing, from the first tentative research outline in January of 2008 through the defense in October of 2009.

Finally, I extend my deepest gratitude to those in Drumcliff: Mr. Keane and Mr. Waters, and the Meehans and the Keaney's, whose great hospitality and knowledge of Drumcliff, its forts, and its history were so essential to my fieldwork. Without them, this project might not have been possible.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It sounds strange now, looking back, but on the cross-country ride from the Dublin bus hub to Sligo's central bus station I couldn't help but notice, from what vantage point the bus window could offer as we passed through the even terrain of central Ireland, an aesthetic similarity with the Florida cattle country where I'd spent much of 2006 and 2007 as a contract archaeology field tech.

The initial illusion of geographic familiarity did little to quell my growing sense of apprehension, however, as we continued west through the counties of Connacht. Undulations on the horizon were becoming low mountains as we drew ever closer to County Sligo and the Atlantic coast, and my fieldwork destination of Drumcliff, burial place of the poet Yeats. The day was cool and clear. It was the last sunny day, however, for the next two weeks.

All the while, despite anything that may have reminded me of home, I was acutely aware of the fact that I was a complete stranger here. The very real concern about how I'd get in touch with my landlords once I got to Sligo -- the only two contacts I had in Ireland at this point -- weighed on my mind. The thrill of finally being in Ireland, however, did much to temper my apprehension. As any experienced traveler knows, a person can dream about travel all that he or she wants, and yet still be enthralled by the real place. Looking out over the landscape I thought about my impending research. What remained of the old Celtic worldview? What place did a belief in fairies or other spirits still have in this part of the country? Would I find enough people willing to talk about these subjects?

One needs only to open a work by a 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Irish folklore compilation, such as William Butler Yeats's *Irish Fairy and Folktales* (2003) or Lady Jane Wilde's *Legends*,

*Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland* (2006), or browse the Mythology and New Age sections of a good book store to find numerous fanciful tales of the drama between the human and Fairy worlds. But these are stories passed down through generations, and depending on the work in question they may also be heavily influenced by other folkloric and/or spiritual traditions, or even a social class bias of the authors. I wanted accounts from individuals today who believe in or have an opinion to offer about these traditions. During the course of the fieldwork period I would speak with dozens of individuals, some of whom work for government agencies in County Sligo, about their opinions on fairies, either as part of the living Irish cultural landscape or as a superstition of generations past.

Specifically, my research would seek to answer the following questions:

1. Who still believes in the existence of fairies or other spirits? Why do they believe in them? Do they believe in unique types of fairies or do they consider all of them to be a part of a more generic classification? When and how did they acquire this belief, and why do they maintain it today? Have they actually interacted with something they believed to be a fairy or a manifestation of some other power of the Irish spirit world?
2. For those individuals who do not believe, why don't they? What do they think of people who are believers?
3. For those people who were aware of the traditions, superstitions, and/or beliefs surrounding "fairy forts", did they believe that fairies resided inside? Did they believe

that fairies and the forts were related in some other way? Or if not, then what were their feelings or opinions about the forts?

4. What demographic differences or similarities are there between believers and non-believers?
5. A final question emerged later in the project: has anyone claimed to have had an encounter with the Irish death-messenger spirit most commonly known as the banshee? Lysaght (1986) identifies this spirit as being only semi-grounded in fairy lore, stating that many people separate belief in the banshee from belief in fairies. What are the key traits of encounters with this spirit? How did it affect the lives of those involved?

I kept an eye out for lone thorn bushes in a plain of grass, or a prominent mound of earth in an otherwise flat field that might signify the presence of one of the enigmatic fairy forts, as both of these types of landmarks were said by generations passed to be places claimed by the fairies. While I saw a number of sites fitting what I understood to be a general physical description of these places, there was no way to know from the vantage of the bus seat whether the inhabitants of the area had come to attribute any of these particular landmarks with having a spiritual supernatural presence or significance.

While I would quickly come to recognize and appreciate the closeness between the people in the communities I'd be visiting during my stay in Ireland I was, on that first day, amazed to find that indeed a cab driver could take a person where he needed to go with only a

name and town to go by. From the Sligo bus station I was borne down the road by cab six miles to Drumcliff, and the home of Frank and Una Keaney, my first key research contacts and hosts for the next two months in Ireland.

All names used in this thesis are pseudonyms, unless the participants agreed to the use of their real names. In some cases a participant's real name will be used in one section of the report in accordance with their permission and wishes while a pseudonym for them will be used elsewhere.

A quick word on terminology and capitalization is also in order. There are various ways of spelling many of the fairy lore-related words used in this thesis. For instance, the word "fairy" itself can also appear in literature as "faerie" or "fairie." I have used fairy for the singular and fairies for the plural throughout this thesis. When lower-case, the term refers to the beings themselves. When upper-case, it refers to the fairy world, or is used to broadly encompass all things related to fairy lore. The use of the same word to describe both a thing and a place, in this case, comes from how the Irish word for these beings (*Sí* or *Sidhe*... another instance of different spellings for the same Irish word, as well) can describe either the spirits themselves or the place they come from.

Finally, a question now posed to me multiple times, is whether I'm a believer in fairies or in nature spirits. To this I can only say that the short answer is no, and that I do not subscribe to any specific spiritual or religious convictions. But I think this lack of belief is ultimately what lies behind my fascination with the mechanisms and manifestations of spiritual belief in others. My specific interest in the folk tales and spiritual traditions of Ireland made the study of modern

folk religion in the Republic such an attractive, if ambitious, goal for me as a graduate student of anthropology, and it is a field of research I hope to continue pursuing in the future.

### *Fairies, Fairy Forts, and Modern Ireland*

There are a multitude of beings to be found in other regions of Europe that are sometimes described in non-scholarly literature as being members of the fairy world, while anthropologically speaking the cultural descriptions of these beings are in most ways similar to Irish fairies. These include the Huldre Folk of Norwegian lore and their cousins the Huldu of Iceland, Germanic kobolds and wood-wives, trolls, elves, goblins, plus a whole host of beings from the other Celtic countries such as the Pixies of Cornwall or the Gwyllion of Wales. All of them, as well as further examples from other continents such as the Algonquian Maymaygwayshi in North America, might be described as fairies in a broad sense, in that they share many of the characteristics of Celtic fairies: living underground, magical power, capricious behavior, often being of small stature, and having an affinity for occasionally crossing paths with people. Some other cross-cultural examples from Norway (Kvideland 1988), Iceland (Einarsson 1991; Simpson 1972), and further abroad will be discussed in some cases because of their similarities to Irish fairy lore as well. For the most part, however, the body of fairy literature referenced in this thesis that does not focus specifically on Irish tradition is still a largely Eurocentric sample.

Edward Burnett Tylor described animism in summary as being a belief in spirits. In Robert Lowie's *Primitive Religion* (1952), Lowie builds upon this concept by defining what a

“spirit” is. He described it as something not entirely incorporeal, but as “less grossly material” than normal physical objects (Lowie 1952: 99-100.) This would imply an ability of spirits to interact, perhaps even in a directly physical way, with physical beings such as mortal men and women, livestock, and crops. This is a trait ascribed to fairies in essentially any text on the subject. When Walter Evans-Wentz was conducting his study on Celtic fairy beliefs in the first few years of the 20th century (eventually publishing *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* in 1911), a study that contributed vital anthropological data to the record, the testimony of numerous witnesses were collected describing the ability of fairies to physically influence the world (Evans-Wentz 2003.) Robert R. Marett’s theory of animatism (2004), a practice attributed to cultures that ascribe certain sacred objects, places, animals or people with powers, but not personified or associated with the spirits found in animistic type beliefs. Marett specifically states that the powers in animatism differ from Tylor’s spirits (Marett 2004: viii, 135.) A vague but influential power is, in a sense, on display in the belief found among many of my project participants that the sites called fairy forts possess a mysterious energy, and this will be examined again in Chapter 3. However, whenever a term like animism, animatism, or theism appears in this document it should be viewed as being generally defined, and something to be taken “as is” within a culture. They should not, therefore, be seen as implying a judgment against the level of “advancement” of that culture or group’s worldview (as Marett and others have sometimes been accused of doing in their theories on religious development and practice.)

It is not essential to describe in detail each member “species” of the fairy world in the context of both folk stories and anthropological data here, mainly because none of the project



participants expressed a belief in any specific subset of fairies, with the exception of the Banshee in a handful of cases, which are dealt with in Chapter Two.

While fairies can be found in many forms in the popular cultures of the West and beyond, I believe my research is important in that it seeks answers to how and why fairy beliefs impact the culture of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ireland. Fairies have become commoditized in the form of Disney fairies, St. Patrick's Day leprechaun decorations, children's storybooks, and some corporate logos and advertising campaigns. Since the popular image of them is typically the very embodiment of innocence, magic, and general wonderment, there will probably be a fair market to cash in on fairies in the foreseeable future even though (and in part because) they rarely match the often unpredictable and sometimes deadly nature of the originals.

But while fairies continue to have a public presence in the form of entertainment and advertising, I also wanted to find out whether or not they still had any relevance to my project participants in a spiritual or religious sense, or if anyone attributed ill fortune, unhealthy livestock, or missing personal belongings to denizens of the Fairy world? Sacred buildings, sites, and landmarks from pagan prehistory and Catholicism (co-opted in many cases from pagan traditions) cover every county in Ireland, and these things are encountered frequently and easily even in the confines of my research area. But still, even the once deeply-entrenched Catholic establishment is losing its place at the forefront of Irish spirituality, and if this is the case with the primary organized religion of the island, what might that have to say about the folk-spirituality to exist alongside it? Christianity, which in various denominations or sects serves as the majority religious preference not only in Ireland but in Europe in general, is facing declines in active adherents and church attendance according to sources from national and international

secular organizations (for instance the Dutch Central Statistics Bureau and World Values Survey respectively), to religious organizations such as the Barna research group and the Vatican. According to the Dublin Archdiocese (2004), Ireland's church attendance rate is around 60%, and that is actually fairly high for a European nation. According to an EU Eurobarometer poll (2005), Ireland's closest regional neighbors of France, the United Kingdom, and the Scandinavian nations have populations where the majority of people don't even believe in a god, let alone attend religious services. However a sizeable minority of the populations of these countries stated a belief in, as the poll put it, a "spirit or life force", including 22% of the Irish citizens polled in this survey.

In the opinion of many of my contacts in this project, the "modern" lifestyle is the driving factor behind reduced religiosity. Formal schooling since modern life emphasizes formal schooling and exposes individuals to people, places, and ideas other than those they grew up with. For this reason, I feel it is essential to our knowledge of contemporary Sligo culture and Irish culture as a whole to understand where fairy beliefs exist within it today, since that same explanation was often given by project participants for the decline in traditional folk belief in Ireland at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Even Sligo residents in their fifties and sixties said that while they had heard references to fairies in the context of fairy forts and folktales in their childhood, even their parents' generation was by-and-large setting aside the belief that Ireland was literally inhabited by a race of spirits capable of taking physical form and interacting with people.

As noted, my fieldwork sought to assess and answer several key questions and to develop an understanding of the prevalence of belief in fairies and a Fairy or spirit world. The Christian

ideas of an afterlife are not considered a spirit world in the context of my research, unless there was a syncretism between those beliefs and the Celtic Fairy or spirit world, or with fairies that bridges theism with another religious worldview, specifically animism (in short, a belief in spirits) or animatism (in short, the imbuing of particular objects, animals, or people with a nebulous but powerful, even dangerous energy.) Perhaps animatism in particular, because of the vague mechanism ascribed to the powers of the fairs by most people who believe those powers exist. The taboo status assigned by some to fairy fairs and the dire consequences believed to result from inappropriate behavior around them, does at least echo of animatism, even though the large majority of the area residents are Catholic. Regarding syncretism more broadly, I was interested in knowing who if anyone held the opinion that belief in the traditional spirits of the Celtic world, such as fairies, and a belief in Christianity were mutually exclusive, or if both sets of beliefs could coexist within the worldview of any given person.

The inspiration behind my original vision for this project and my research questions, prior to their refinement and the execution of my fieldwork, had come about purely by chance at a bookstore in Columbus, Georgia in the summer of 2005. It was there that I came across American anthropologist Dr. Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz's work *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911), originally written over the course of several years in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century but released again in 1990 with an introduction by Terence McKenna. The work was a substantial document detailing a multitude of interviews that Evans-Wentz conducted with a wide variety of people throughout the Celtic regions of northwestern Europe. From rural farmers, to city dwellers with university educations, to mystics and clergymen, Evans-Wentz compiled what they had to say about the spirits known variously as fairies, the *Sidhe*, the Gentry, the Little People, or

a host of other terms. While Evans-Wentz is also known for his extensive work in Tibet, *The Fairy Faith* was an earlier endeavor on his part (and with which he earned the degree of *Docteur-ès-Lettres* from the University of Rennes in Brittany, France, in 1909.)

The starting perspective for my research was, then, the broader framework of belief in fairies of a century ago or more, as recorded by Evans-Wentz and Kirk, which I planned to compare to contemporary beliefs, in order to determine similarities and differences in beliefs in contemporary coastal Sligo. However, as the research progressed it became clear that there would not be enough affirmative responses in my participant sample to the question of who believes in fairies.

In addition to beliefs in spiritual beings, sources also described special places associated with fairies. Most of the key sources cited throughout this thesis, which cover the last 100-odd years from scholarly, storyteller, and folklore collector's perspectives (for example Evans-Wentz 2003; Lenihan 2004; Wilde 2006, respectively), all clearly indicate a tradition of reverence for fairy forts and fairy bushes dating back to before popular writers such as Yeats and Lady Gregory began recording the local lore from their rural neighbors in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Because fairy forts are a subject on which much of this thesis dwells, a brief discussion here as a preface to that chapter is appropriate. While the practice is more or less island-wide, to my knowledge no comprehensive data exists to indicate what percentage of the island-wide population actually associates supernatural powers with places around the landscape called fairy forts or fairy bushes/trees. My own data suggests it is probably very common, but this is only representative of a small area, and furthermore the association with fairies and folk tradition does not serve as the basis for the taboo against intrusion upon or the harming of the forts in all the

cases I examined, and these exceptions are noted and discussed in Chapter Three. Nonetheless, the argument must be made that these sites should be considered sacred, if not all in the same context. In this thesis, the term “fairy forts” or “forts” (in context) is used throughout to refer to these sites. Other terms like “fairy mound” are only discussed briefly. “Fairy fort” and “fort” were the preferred terms of my project participants, and were used almost universally over terms like “fairy mound” or “fairy hill” to refer to these sites.

But even though the religious aspect of the forts has diminished, it would make sense to suppose that a long tradition of venerating particular elements of the natural landscape must precede the modern day. What theoretical origins could there be for the fort/tree/bush elements in Ireland? In Frazer’s abridgment of his earlier *Golden Bough* (*The New Golden Bough*, 1959), he devotes many pages of text to the origins of the sacred landscape, flora, and fauna. 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D. philosopher Porphyry stated, regarding his interpretation of the beliefs of those who made their living from the land: “... their superstition did not stop at animals but extended even to plants. For why should the slaughter of an ox or a sheep be a greater wrong than the felling of a fir or an oak, seeing that a soul is implanted in these trees also?” (Frazer 1959: 74) Frazer goes on to describe various examples of more modern traditions which followed a similar line of thinking; the Hidatsa people of the Dakotas, Yasawu Islanders of Fiji, Kiwai of southern New Guinea, and others from Europe, Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. The Kiwai example in particular notes something (Frazer 195: 75) in common with the Irish tradition, which is that trees standing alone or which are otherwise conspicuous are shown particular reverence. It is believed that such trees house *etengena*, a type of forest and garden spirit. The Lunantishee in Ireland inhabits the Blackthorns in a similar fashion, at least traditionally (Pennick 1996: 32.)

Nigel Pennick, author of *Celtic Sacred Landscapes* (1996: 21-35) comments further on plausible origins for the reverence for fairy bushes in Ireland and Celtic areas specifically. Reverence for certain plants, a practice begun by ancient nature cults, was perpetuated over the millennia even as religions and attitudes changed. But trees in general would have been of vital importance to the people living in the great forests of ancient Europe. The trees, as Pennick remarks, “provide people with shelter, materials and fuel and, by their location and shape, express the character of a place (1996: 23.) Pennick also addresses hawthorns and blackthorns, as well as “lone trees”, as having a particular value. All three of those examples are of relevance in my project since both thorn types could be found near virtually all the fairy forts I had the privilege of being shown in Sligo, and a lone tree characterized the sacred spot from another participant’s testimony. Lysaght, in *The Good People* (1991) tells of an account of punishment for damaging a fort from the central Irish county of Laois. The account includes all the primary elements I’ve yet summarized about these features: the taboo against harming forts, the element of claiming a distinctive spot on the landscape for forts and their associated flora, and the affirmation of the site as “sacred” (1991: 29-32.) This latter element, the “sacredness” of the location, was identified as such by the fact that the individual retelling the story in question (that of a man who lost his hand to infection after being cut with a thorn from a fairy bush atop the fort he was damaging by clearing space for soil tilling) “objectively believed” (1991: 30) there to be fairy powers at work at this place. Replace “fairy” powers with “supernatural” or “unexplainable” powers and the same sense of belief exists among many of my own project participants whose testimony was taken regarding forts and trees.

The fact that fairy forts may consist of the remnants of prehistoric or medieval structures leads to a problem of archaeological classification. Even though archaeologists may recognize the fact that local people call the site a fairy fort, “fairy forts” cannot actually be classified as a distinct form of site unto themselves, since they have a two different (in some cases maybe even dichotomous) anthropological values. That is, the historical, archaeological value of the underlying structures and artifacts exists independently of site’s modern cultural value as a “fairy fort”. This is because a site’s designation as a “fairy fort” will always postdate the construction of at least some (most likely all) of the underlying structure. Having said this, it should also be said that some fairy forts do exist over sites with a preexisting sacred aspect (tombs, shrines, henges/megaliths.)

The Archaeological Record-Classifications for County Sligo (1995), for example, lists the type and quantity of all known ruins and megaliths (known at that time) in the County, and they number over 3,000. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, despite the fact that hardly anyone (in this project) believes in the fairy world of old, they still assign a supernatural component to the forts, ensuring that they retain a status of a generalized, non-Christian but also non-traditional, “sacredness” in the modern world.

In 1963 a law was passed saying that no new residences could be built within 100 meters of the center of a fort, and farmers’ REPS (Rural Environmental Protection Scheme) subsidies can be withheld for disturbing forts (or other sites with historic value) on the farmers’ own land. Animals are, however, still allowed to graze on the fort at the discretion of the farm owner, although as I was informed by a key Drumcliff source some landowners will set up fences to keep animals off the fort.

### *Methods and Project Boundaries*

When I began this research I was initially armed only with the knowledge I had previously acquired on Irish folklore and fairy beliefs from published sources. However, I had a fairly solid grounding in cultural anthropology, having received a B.A. in Anthropology and having two semesters of graduate level courses completed at the time. In addition to this, for much of the two years between the completion of my undergraduate education and the start of graduate school I had worked as a field team member of a Florida-based public archaeology/cultural resource management company (Archaeological Consultants Inc.) Although the fairy fort aspect of my research focused almost exclusively on the modern-day cultural significance of the sites and thus was only superficially archaeological in nature, it still required a critical view of the landscape and consideration of the features that may be associated with known or probable relevance to the project. Since site reconnaissance in the cultural resource management field requires these same skills, I believe my experiences working as a field tech, while not extensive, still served a valuable purpose when it came time to do my research into Drumcliff's fairy forts.

My only preexisting contact in Ireland before my arrival was the couple I would be renting from for the two months of fieldwork. All other project participants would have to be contacted through them as a "snowball" sample or recruited from the general public. When I wasn't out collecting data I was staying at a rented flat adjacent to my landlord's home. I'd found it through an Irish real estate rental website and its details could not have been more



perfect: affordable and close to Sligo Town but with rural areas stretching out for miles in other directions, close to the bus routes, and available for short-term leasing. The majestic Ben Bulbin mountain would greet me each time I opened the door to leave the flat.

My ethnographic research was done using participant interviews as the sole form of original data collection in the field; sporadic email communication afterwards provided some supplementary data from people I had met while in Ireland. Some of these interviews were formal, while others were spontaneous or otherwise less formal or structured. Some lasted up to several hours and others much less. I went to the field with a digital camera and digital audio recorder, but oftentimes because ambient sound or weather conditions I would record information from interviews on paper. This was particularly true for short interviews or during conversations that just happened to come about in public places without any pre-planning.

My intent with the project participants was to represent the people in and around Sligo Town as broadly as possible, so that trends or similarities in beliefs within any particular age, gender, or religious group could be identified and then compared with beliefs from other demographics. Not all of the people I encountered or spoke with while making my way back and forth between the effective project boundaries of Tubbercurry and the County Leitrim border (see Figure 1) provided enough information relevant to my study to be incorporated into the body of data in a meaningful way. Other participants, particularly those with whom I conversed with on buses, came from further away -- often from the Galway or Derry areas; when I have included information from them, I have noted that they are not Sligo residents. This thesis includes data from 52 project participants living in the Sligo Town vicinity and ten from outside the county whose information is included in the data tables of Chapter Two. This number does

not include people with whom I had only a very cursory conversation, or people whose beliefs were spoken of by project participants but whom I never personally met or was able to contact. While secondary-source information did not go overlooked or unrecorded during this project, only primary sources are counted in the data tables in Chapter Two.

Data was also collected in the form of Sligo County Council maps of known ancient sites graciously provided by county employees. Additional data in the form of photographs of local fairy forts (pointed out to me by some very helpful project participants) was collected, and is examined in Chapter Three.

Since all of the data that was collected was taken at a distance no greater than ten miles from the Atlantic coast or Sligo Bay, I use the term “Coastal Sligo” to summarize the boundaries of this study. The actual topography of the area is extremely varied however, and can be seen in Figure 1 below. The outer boundaries of the fieldwork occurred between Knocknashee in the south and Mullaghmore in the north, a distance of just over fifty kilometers by road. The vast majority of data used in this thesis however was collected inside the boundaries of Sligo Town and Drumcliff.

County Sligo’s history of human habitation is an exceptionally long one, with megalithic construction dating back to at least 6,000 YBP. This is evidenced by radiocarbon dates taken at the Carrowmore passage tombs by archaeologist Göran Bührenhult in the 1990’s. Sligo Town began as a castle in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and was often the target of military campaigns from both inside and outside of Ireland, due to its location on the shore of what would become known as Sligo Bay. The County was one of the hardest hit in all of Ireland during the period between the 1841 and 1851 census, this being the time period in which the Great Famine occurred. Sligo lost

at least 29% of its population to emigration or death, declining from 186,886 people to 128,515 (Freeman 1944.) Today the County's population is significantly smaller than even that, numbering some 60,894 (Central Statistics Office Ireland 2006), most (27%) of whom are between the ages of 25 and 44 and work in the broad industrial sectors of manufacturing, retail, or construction, primarily in or around Sligo Town. Over 53,000 of the county's population are Roman Catholic, making it the overwhelming majority religion, followed by some 2,500 members of the Church of Ireland and a similar number of nonbelievers. The number of those stating they are not a part of an organized religion has nearly doubled or more in every census conducted by the Central Statistics Office since 1981; a spreadsheet of this information can be found in the report folders of the CSO's census website, <http://beyond2020.cso.ie/census/ReportFolders/ReportFolders.aspx>. The next Irish census will be taken in 2011.

### *A Brief Summary of Key Fairy Lore and Literature*

Fairies are not exclusively Irish, and appear in the lore of the chief Celtic societies of the modern day, including Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall. The following summary, however, focuses primarily with the beings as they appear in Irish lore.

The word *sidhe* (or *sí* as some authors prefer), despite now referring to most of Ireland's fairies, post-dates by several centuries the first appearance of things that are recognizable as fairy beings in the literature. Proinsias Mac Cana, in his entry on the Sidhe (spelled *Sídh* in that publication) in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1922: 314-315) states that the earliest

known mention of the term to be in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century *Spoils of Annwn*, wherein Arthur leads his knights against the otherworldly residents in “Kaer Sidi” (“the fairy fortress” or “the mound fortress”.) The modern Irish word, which appears as both *sidhe* and *sí* in different texts, can be interpreted in context as meaning either the mounds or forts, or the fairies themselves.

The Irish Mythological Cycle recounts several waves of prehistoric immigrant races to Ireland, and although this is more mythological fancy than historical fact, it serves as the foundation of a primary interpretation of what the *Sidhe* actually are. Some Celtic historians such as Standish O’Grady and Henri D’Arbois de Jubainville addressed this, as did some of the contacts of anthropologists like Evans-Wentz. Non-academic publications addressing fairies or Irish or pan-Celtic spirituality may also utilize this interpretation. In this case, the *Sidhe* are an incarnation of the mythical *Tuatha de Danaan*, the magical race described as “Gods but not Gods” in de Jubainville’s translated *Book of Leinster*. The Tuatha De Danaan were supplanted in the legend by the migration of Celts to the island, who drove the Tuatha De Danaan underground... into the *sidhe* (the word being used here to reference a place.)

But while such accounts as those are a fascinating and intricate look back into an Irish history and legend infused with ancient myth, and offer us some early examples of the magical Sidhe race put down in writing, they do not tell us much about belief in fairies as an element of folk religion. To find an early example of this, a reading of Robert Kirk’s *The Secret Commonwealth* is invaluable. University of Essex professor and author Marina Warner states that Scottish minister Robert Kirk’s 17<sup>th</sup> Century treatise *The Secret Commonwealth* has “no precursors” (Kirk 2007: xx) as far as studies of fairies and their supernatural powers go. While fairies in some form appear in literature for centuries before Kirk’s work, Kirk’s treatise stands

out in that it comes closer to the realm of the ethnography than any surviving earlier work yet known.

Kirk, a Scottish Episcopalian minister, left *The Secret Commonwealth* (2007) in manuscript form at the time of his death (or as local legend has it, his abduction by the fairies) in 1692. It would be published in 1815 and republished up until at least 2007. The work is one of the most noteworthy efforts by anyone to document belief in the *Sith* (the Scotch transcription of *Sidhe*) in a way that was free of condemnation and religious bias. The work makes no mention of the *Tuatha de Danaan* of the Irish Mythological Cycle. Kirk instead refers to Fairies as being of a “middle nature betwixt man and angel, (as were daemons thought to be of old), of intelligent studious spirits, and light, changeable bodies (like those called astral) somewhat of the nature of a condensed cloud and best seen in twilight” (Kirk 200: 5-6.) This is a description also agreed upon by other participants in Evans-Wentz’s study as well as those in folklore such as Lady Wilde’s *Legends, Charms and Superstitions of Ireland* (Wilde 2006: 256-257.)

It should be noted, though, that while Kirk considers these beings to have been created by God, as were all spirits and living things in the worldview of the Episcopalian establishment of the day, he does not say that they were among the beings cast out of Heaven following the fall of Lucifer. He argues that it is not a sin to interact with the fairy beings, and harbored a hope that one day humanity could converse with them as surely “as we do now with the Chinese and Antipodes” (Kirk 200: 53.) Lady Wilde states cite that some Irish people believed the Fairies to be fallen angels, as do some of Evans-Wentz’s sources in Ireland (Evans-Wentz 2003: 67, 76), Brittany (2003: 205, 212), Scotland (2003: 105, 109, 113), and Wales (2003: 154) who each describe their local fairy population (fairies/*sidhe*, *fées*, *sith*, *corrigans*, etc) as such. However,

Lady Gregory, a contemporary of Wilde, includes a folk tale in *A Book of Saints and Wonders* (1907) about St. Patrick attempting to convert a cohort of *Sidhe* people to Christianity, seemingly implying that the fairies are not in fact fallen beings and thus it would be possible for them to be taken into the Christian God's good graces. In any event, while there may be a predominant local tradition that states where the fairies come from, there can still be diversity (or disagreement as the case may be) in these origin stories, even with a particular area.

In addition to the scholars, folklorists, historians, and others who have contributed to the body of knowledge on fairy lore and folk tradition surrounding them over the years, some well-known individuals from popular culture, such as *Sherlock Holmes* author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and *Monty Python* star Terry Jones, have contributed to the broader body of popular fairy literature. This is in addition to the numerous movies (most famously the Disney films *Fantasia*, *Darby O'Gill and the Little People*, and of course *Peter Pan*) and children's stories featuring fairies that, while sometimes far out of context of Celtic or other fairy traditions, are fanciful enough to delight people of all ages.

While the nature of fairy beliefs in modern Sligo appear from my experience to differ greatly from those described by anthropologists and folklorists working a century or more ago, a general sense of belief persists despite the great changes in the level of formal education, occupation, and travel opportunities that are now a part of the average Irish citizen's life experience. Perhaps most, with a handful of exceptions which I will examine in the coming chapters in more detail, no longer believe in the literal existence of magical beings inhabiting their landscape, but belief in a power surrounding fairy forts and fairy bushes/trees remains a part

of the living Irish culture (and this is felt quite strongly around the Sligo area.) It is this subject which I will examine in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER 2: PARTICIPANTS, DATA TABLES, THE BANSHEE, AND THREE ACCOUNTS OF BANSHEE ENCOUNTERS**

*“Do ya think there’re fairies in Ireland, Brian?”* Frank Keaney asked me good-naturedly.

The question caught me off-guard. It was June 20<sup>th</sup> of 2008 and I’d been in Sligo all of an hour at that point. I’d just met my landlords, the Keaney’s, not ten minutes before this. They actually knew very little about me then apart from where I was traveling from and that I’d be doing some kind of graduate school research while I was in Ireland. The question about whether I personally thought fairies existed in Ireland or anywhere else bothered me because I didn’t think I’d implied any such thing, and I was initially worried that right off the bat I had given a poor description of what my research was actually about. Or, worse, that I’d given the impression I believed in something that for all I knew, my landlords thought was nothing but foolish old superstitions. Such a thing might have certainly hindered me later since the fate of my research all but relied on the willingness of this couple to introduce me to some friends and neighbors who were ready to give their input on any and all things Fairy.

As we continued talking, I began to clarify what it was I was doing in Sligo, how I’d become interested in this subject, and how I’d be collecting my information. As I’d expected, Frank Keaney and his wife Una, both retired nurses who have resided at their current residence for over 20 years, were well aware of the fairies’ prominence in the stories and some old beliefs from Ireland and other Celtic Countries. They did, however, express the opinion that I may have a hard time finding anyone who was still a “true believer” in Ireland’s oft-invisible residents. They said, essentially, that believers were still out there, but probably declining in number all the



time. The subject of fairy forts was mentioned only in passing during my initial meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Keaney, although it would be addressed in greater depth later.

While I believe that the data presented in Chapter 3 strongly suggests a widespread belief in a nameless “force” of unknowable age and origin localized around the fairy forts of coastal Sligo, the data also demonstrates a growing separation between a belief in sentient spirits and a belief in the power of the forts. The core question I pose in this chapter is, “does anyone believe in fairies anymore?” That question logically had to precede any inquiry into the how and why behind such beliefs, assuming any believers could be found. It was also this key question that served as the original foundation of my research proposal, and the one that I had anticipated I’d spend the largest amount of time on once I arrived in Ireland to commence my fieldwork.

What I found from among the 62-person sample of the most informative research participants was that people in this part of Ireland generally do not believe in fairies anymore. There are some common reasons that people gave as explanations for this trend, which sometimes applied not only to belief in traditional spirits but to Christianity as well (I discussed these beliefs later on in this chapter.) And yet, despite that, there was no shortage of individual opinions on things Fairy. In this chapter, I will present a multitude of accounts from people of varying backgrounds and ages who related testimony to me that exemplified a particular viewpoint on spirits and/or the supernatural. Narratives will be presented using American English conventions, rather than as a transcription of the participants’ way of speaking. This is for the sake of enhanced clarity to American readers, as well as being a practical necessity, since many of these interviews were conducted without the aid of an audio recorder (thus making exact replication of extended dialogue impossible in many cases. For the most part, pseudonyms

will be used in this thesis. Those who wished their real names be used have specifically indicated this on the informed consent document.

Additionally, I include data I collected about the banshee, the spirit woman who heralds death or misfortune. The very name banshee links the spirit with fairy lore. However, it has retained a place in the worldview of at least some Irish people who profess to not believe in fairies. I believe this warrants discussion to the depth that my interviews with those who say they've been in the banshee's presence allows.

#### *Background Data from Sligo Residents and other Project Participants*

I had the opportunity to talk about my project with numerous individuals during the two months I was living in Drumcliff. Of all the interviews and conversations conducted in the course of this research, 52 Sligo residents and ten others from outside the county provided information substantive enough to warrant inclusion in most of the data tables below. In some cases a smaller sample from those 62 is used, in which case those who did not provide sufficient information will be listed as “unknown” or “unspecified”. In some cases, the relatives of Sligo residents who live elsewhere but visited Sligo during my project have been counted among Sligo residents in the data tables. There were five such individuals who I used data from.

The following data tables use the information I compiled from the 62 project participants who provided the most productive interview or interviews noted above, to illustrate apparent trends or common characteristics regarding different aspects of residents' thoughts on fairy-related topics. In the event there are “unknowns” in any given table, it is because the subject did

not come up in that conversation. In any conversation of sufficient length, however, all of the issues represented by the tables would have been brought up either by my line of questioning or by a combination of that and the open-ended dialogue with the interviewee. Some tables are phrased as questions. This is to succinctly summarize the question at hand for the reader, and does not reflect the actual wording or line of questioning I used to obtain the data for that table.

*Table 1: Participant's County of Residence*

Participants' County of Residence					
Sligo	Derry	Donegal	Galway	Leitrim	Mayo
52	4	1	2	1	2

Residence does not imply birthplace. I learned the birthplace of a handful of individuals who were not originally from Sligo, but in most of those cases they came from another Connacht county. Three participants were from England but have lived in County Sligo for nearly a decade or more. There are five individuals that I know of within this sample who have lived in at least three or more different cities in different counties for a decade or longer.

*Table 2: Participants' Gender*

Participant's Gender by County		
	Male	Female
Sligo	24	28
Derry	0	4
Donegal	1	0
Galway	1	1
Leitrim	0	1
Mayo	1	1
Total	27	35

*Table 3: Participants' Age*

Participants' Age Group by County															
	Sligo		Derry		Donegal		Galway		Leitrim		Mayo		Total		
Gender	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	All
18-24	1	2											1	2	3
25-34	2	3											2	3	5
35-44	6	9		1			1						7	10	17
45-54	8	6		2									8	8	16
55-64	5	4			1							1	6	5	11
65-74		1								1			0	2	2
75+													0	0	0
Unknown	2	3	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	3	5	8

Given the brevity of some of these conversations it was in the interest of focusing on other areas of discussion or for courtesy's sake that age did not come up as a subject. I do not believe it was likely that anyone in the group of unknown age was below 40 or above 60 years of age, and I annotated as much in my notes on these conversations.

*Table 4: Participants' Religion and Degree of Religiosity*

Participants' Religious Preference by County							
	Sligo	Derry	Donegal	Galway	Leitrim	Mayo	Total
Roman Catholicism	40			1	1		42
Church Of Ireland	0	1					1
Belief in Higher Power	6	1	1				8
Skeptical	1					1	2
None	1						1
Unknown	4	2		1		1	8

I asked a number of participants about their religious affiliation, but the conversations did not go deeply into the subject of just *how* religious they are. For those participants whose religiosity I was able to ascertain, nearly all of them indicated that they believed in the concept of the Christian God and of the moral teachings of Christ, but that they were not strict adherents to Catholic dogma or the . Most said they attended church semi-regularly but maybe not every week. Some said that they will attend church services sometimes with family or for particular holidays but that they had no personal affiliation with organized religion. These respondents are counted among those believing in a higher power (or with “none” in the case of the Sligo respondent.)

Around a dozen or so said they attended services on certain holidays only, or had irregular attendance at mass. Those who did not affiliate with the Catholic Church or Church of Ireland stated that they believed in either a life force that flows throughout all living things, or a mysterious or unknowable higher power that may influence the natural processes of the Earth or touch the hearts or minds of people from time to time. These individuals often said they came from non- or semi-observant Catholic families, and then drifted away from the official church as they got older.

Because this area of Ireland is overwhelmingly Catholic -- 87%, according to the Central Statistics Office Ireland (2006), at least some of the “unknowns” from this table probably fall under that religious category.

*Table 5: Where Did You Hear About Fairy Lore While Growing Up?*

Where Did Participants Hear About Fairy Lore or a Fairy World While Growing Up?*							
	Sligo	Derry	Donegal	Galway	Leitrim	Mayo	Total
Parents	49	3	1	2	1	2	58
Grandparents**	45	3	1	2	1	2	54
Middle-Aged Relatives	40	3	1	2	1	1	48
Elderly Relatives	44	3	1	2	1	2	53
Middle-Aged Neighbors	42	3	1	2	1	1	50
Elderly Neighbors	42	3	1	2	1	1	50
Catholic Clergy***	2			1			3
Other Religious Officials	None						0
Popular Media or Advertising†	50	3	1	2	1	1	58
School‡	See notes below.						-

\* This refers to people who spoke of fairies in any context (including fairy forts), and does not necessarily infer a current belief in any aspect of a fairy world.

\*\* I believe that the lower number here, compared to the “parents” row, is due to grandparents dying before the project participant was born, or when the project participant was too young to remember any stories that were told to them.

\*\*\*These respondents noted upon further questioning that this was not in the context of a church service, and that their families had known a local priest or deacon who in private had spoken of old fairy lore at one time or another.

† Many of the respondents who cited popular media made mention of the 1959 Disney film *Darby O’Gill and the Little People*, which incorporated traditional Irish spiritual and mythical elements into its plot and is based on the story by British-Irish author and playwright Herminie T. Kavanaugh (1861-1933.)

‡ A majority of all project participants mentioned that they probably (only a few remembered it specifically) read fairy tales in some class or another at some point, but that was all. No one said that there was any formal education about the place of fairies in Irish culture outside of a literary or oral narrative context. I have opted not to place any numbers in this row, mainly due to the latter point about the vague or nonexistent formal period of instruction on the place of fairies within Irish folk religion or other cultural tradition.

Table 6: Do Participants Believe in a Power, Force, or other Influence Associated with Fairy Forts That May Interact With, React To, or Cause a Reaction In People?

Participants' Belief in Anything Supernatural or Spiritual Relating to Fairy Forts and Bushes.													
	Sligo		Derry		Donegal		Galway		Leitrim		Mayo		Total
Gender	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	All
Strong Belief - Fairy Forts and Bushes	4	6								1			4 7 11
Strong Belief - Fairy Forts Only	3	4											3 4 7
Strong Belief - Fairy Bushes / Trees Only	None										-	-	-
Some Belief - Fairy Forts and Bushes	9	10		1									9 11 20
Some Belief - Fairy Forts Only	2	1		1			1						3 2 5
Some Belief - Fairy Bushes / Tress Only	None										-	-	-
Doesn't Want to Commit to a Yes or No Answer	3	4		1				1					3 6 9
Disbelieve Entirely	1									1			2 0 2
Data Unavailable	2	3		1	1						1		3 4 7
Who of the Above:													
Have Never Heard of Fairy Forts	None										-	-	-
Have Never Heard of Fairy Bushes	2	3		1									2 3 5
Have Never Heard of Fairy Forts or Bushes	None										-	-	-

The data indicates a strong majority belief in *something* significant at work in or around the forts. Both the group that held a strong belief in this, as well as the group holding “some belief” that there is something at work there, are almost universally unsure about what exactly that thing is. Those who actually do believe in fairies or a Fairy world, addressed later in this Chapter, do not confine the presence of these beings to the forts or bushes, although they do believe there are some areas (not only forts or bushes, but larger landforms such as the hill of Knocknashee, located in Sligo outside of Lavagh, some six miles from Tubbercurry.) However, the significance of these numbers in the table is obvious, and the question must be asked, why is this belief so common, yet belief in fairies is apparently so low? As noted in the introduction, the residents themselves attribute it to the “modern” lifestyle and the more common departure from one’s place of birth in search of higher education or job opportunities far away, as well as



the declining prevalence of rigid religious beliefs or a worldview that uses supernatural explanations to explain events in nature. A very common thread among the affirmative responses to a belief in the power of fairy forts and/or bushes is that even though the spiritual traditions of generations ago have less and less place in the lives of many Irish people, the older, even ancient generations that started the tradition of exercising caution around the forts and bushes must have had a rational reason for doing so, even if it was conflated with superstition. It is this forgotten, rational origin of the tradition spoken of by these interviewees that they are respecting when they deal with fairy forts or bushes on their property or elsewhere.

The negative responses acknowledged that some people avoid the forts for reasons such as showing respect for the dead who may be interred there, and that others are merely following tradition just to “be on the safe side,” but may or may not completely believe that what they’re doing is actually meaningful. In other words, such people didn’t completely doubt that there could be something supernatural or influential about the forts, but they still “mostly” doubted it. This particular individual stated that they themselves held a belief in the existence of a higher power, but had drifted away from organized religion years ago. Mary, a Galway bed-and-breakfast owner whom I met in August as my fieldwork was coming to an end, said that she’d “believe in ghosts before she believed in fairies”. Asked whether she believed in ghosts, she smiled and told me about how her family believed that the dead can come back and interact with the living, especially in the overgrown ruins of disused, decaying churches and their cemeteries full of those now long forgotten by living generations. She expressed to me a willingness to believe that the dead may interact with the living, though she did not commit to any answers as to how, when, or why. I had to content myself with her “not saying ‘no’, exactly” type of

answer. She wasn't the first to provide that kind of response, and I was grateful enough that she sharing what she was, but then she said that her younger sister was a believer in both ghosts and fairies. Apparently her sister spoke often of them when she was younger, but everyone just thought it was make-believe. As the sister got older, she continued to proclaim a belief in fairies, and does so to this day. Details were few, but it seems as though a childhood friend of Mary and her sister had died suddenly. The sister attributed the death to retribution by the fairies for "something" the friend had done. Mary, thinking that her sister was merely trying as best she could at her young age to come to grips with the sudden death of the friend, does not recall or did not share further details about why her sister thought the fairies were responsible for the friend's death. She did however say that she's heard other people before and since blame the fairies for calamitous events.

While some had extremely little belief in the existence of fairies or the power of fairy forts, very few committed to stating a lack of belief entirely. Neil, a County Mayo man I spoke with on a bus between Tubbercurry and Sligo Town one rain-slicked evening about halfway through my research, stated his lack of belief in the power of fairy forts, and that fairies in general were superstition and nothing more. He did not deny that the folk traditions behind fairy forts and other fairy beliefs were widespread in his hometown forty years ago. However, he did say that some who spoke of fairies were not genuine believers, and that he thought in those cases it was all just stories that were told to keep people from misbehaving. Elaborating on the latter point he spoke of his childhood, and how his mother and other adults from the town would warn children that retribution by the fairies would result from staying out after dark or going off to play in places they shouldn't. The conversation took an unexpected turn when Neil explained his

opinion behind how the genuine belief in fairies why a genuine belief in fairies has persisted over the generations. He spoke of his experimenting with LSD decades ago, and how during some of these periods of intoxication witnessed small, human-shaped beings amidst the hallucinations. He said that these visions resembled closely the fairies that the older people in his town talked about sometimes. It was his opinion that in generations past the collective experiences of people in altered states of consciousness, brought on by any reason from intoxicating substances to religious ecstasy, made them see visions, either like his own or as something else, and then interpret those experiences and the things seen or felt in them as being of the divine or magical. To Neil, however, it was all a product of the human mind... vague visions interpreted through the lens of one's own life experiences: in his case, a childhood lived in a rural Irish town, and the local folk traditions entrenched in the town's culture.

One of the affirmative responses was also somewhat ambiguous, concerning how the individual assumed all forts had burials beneath them, regardless of whether or not ancient burials were known from the area. Forts then, were to be considered hallowed ground, and his respect for the dead was the reason why he kept a respectful demeanor around these sites. He pointed out that he had no fear of the sites themselves.

*Table 7: Participants' Reasons for Exercising Caution On or Near Fairy Forts and/or Bushes.*

Participants' Reasons for Giving Deference to the Fairy Forts and/or Bushes.															
	Sligo		Derry		Donegal		Galway		Leitrim		Mayo		Total		
Gender	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	All
Fairies live there, or are drawn there		1								1			0	1	1
Prehistoric or Medieval Irish may be or actually are buried there*	See notes below.												-	-	-
General bad luck will follow if you damage or disrespect the spot	4	3		2									4	5	9
Potentially harmful supernatural forces may be at work at that spot	16	17		2			1			1			18	19	37
Potentially life-threatening supernatural forces may be at work at that spot	6	5								1			6	6	12

\* Some forts most likely are actual barrow-style or stone tomb types of burials, according to Mark Keane of the Sligo County Council Heritage Office, and there is certainly no shortage of prehistoric burials in Sligo. At least 150 known barrow-style tombs, and over 100 megalithic or other stone burials, have been positively identified thus far in Sligo according to Alcock and Tunney's 1995 survey.) Only a handful of people brought up this subject without being prompted about it. When asked whether or not they believed that people may be buried under the forts, many of the other respondents said that it was a possibility, and that if there were interments there, then they should be respected like any burial spot.

There are a number of cross-over responses in this table as well. While the vast majority of respondents believed that a non-specific supernatural force may react negatively to intrusion on or damage caused to the fort, some of those same respondents said that they thought there are probably degrees of harm that could come to a person depending on just how badly someone offended whatever it is that resides in or around the forts. Potentially, some said, the penalty

could be death. Several respondents cracked a similar joke when asked the question of whether or not they'd ever consider demolishing or cutting down a fort if it ever proved to be a hindrance to selling their property or maintaining their land: "well," they'd say with a smile, "I'm not ready to go (die) just yet, so no." Fairy forts are the subject of Chapter Three.

*Thoughts on Participants' Responses to the Question: "Do You Believe in Fairies?"*

While not always phrased so bluntly or directly, the question of belief in fairies themselves, irrespective of belief in the powers of forts and bushes, was one that was asked to every individual whose statements, opinions, or other input were used as data somewhere in this thesis. What I intended to answer with this and related questions can be summarized as, "does the person believe in the existence of spirits known traditionally in Ireland as fairies? If so, does he or she believe in specific spirits such as the leprechaun, leanan-shee, water horse, mara, or any other Irish fairy from any book on the subject? Or do they believe in a more generic sort of fairy spirit?" The banshee is not considered a fairy for the purposes of this section, because of the general agreement among the project participants that the banshee tradition exists apart from .

While I heard some interesting narratives about the fairies, the storytellers were clear that they were just stories, and probably passed down over many generations in some form. In the end, 48 people from Sligo said plainly that they do not believe in fairies, and three more said they did not want to rule it out completely although they did not believe the fairies spoken of in Irish folktales to be real. None of the individuals from other counties who I discussed this with confessed a belief in fairies in any form.

The old woman from Leitrim counted in Table 7 who at one point said in reference to the fort near her birthplace, also in Leitrim, “the fort is where they say the fairies would dance. If you danced with them they’d take you with them to their world and you’d never come back.” Questioned for clarification it was apparent she were recounting what other people used to say about the fort, and not stating a personal belief. She said that this was what children were given as a reason to avoid that area, and that she “believed it then” at a young age, but stopped believing as she got older. She did say however that she still believes there are powerful forces around some of the places people call fairy forts, and that she raised her own children to believe that as well. She attributes certain tragedies in the lives of some childhood friends and neighbors to these mysterious forces.

### Lady Melody

Lady Melody Urquhart, founder and owner of the Gillighan’s World Fairy Park and the one participant who did flatly and forwardly state that yes, she was definitely a believer (I believe the phrase “oh, of course!” was used), isn’t actually from Ireland originally. While her native England has its own fairy lore and traditions, it was the natural grandeur of the Sligo landscape overlooking the Moy and the Ox Mountains from the foot of Knocknashee, and the appeal of Irish fairy traditions that have rooted her in County Sligo since 1995. This landscape, infused with rural tranquility and natural beauty, guided the founding of Gillighan’s World as a place for people to come and find a few hours’ respite from their modern lives and relax, surrounded by reminders of earlier times when belief in the magical was common.

Unfortunately a deeper study of the park from the perspective of the anthropology of tourism was not possible, due to its distance from Sligo and my limited time to focus on data closer to Drumcliff. Such a study had been envisioned as a chapter of this thesis, and I travelled to Gillighan's World several times in support of that data acquisition before I came to this realization. A concerted research effort in the Tubbercurry and Knocknashee areas is high on my list of future research goals, to build upon what data I have accumulated thus far on Sligo fairy forts and banshee beliefs.

Melody believes that fairies have a widespread presence in the world, across many cultures. Though these cultures may describe them in different ways, and while some traditions fear the spirits others may see a beauty and benevolence in them. Melody herself believes that the fairies are usually good by nature, and that they are most easily seen by the eyes of children, because of the greater reception and interest children have towards the wonders of nature, fantasy, and all things magical. That being said, she recognizes the respect shown to the fairies by those who live among this landscape of fairy forts and sacred places. She told me of a workman operating a construction vehicle on a rural road near Lavagh, who struck a mound of earth upon which a fairy tree grew, damaging the mound and several branches. Fearful, he ceased work and went home for the day, returning after the workday was over with a bottle of whiskey to pour near the mound (whether it was on it or just near it is inconclusive.)

Melody believes that the fairies are out there for people to see, if they open their eyes and their minds to the Fairy world. She, like other project participants who I discussed it with, does not see any reason why someone could believe in a theistic god figure, be it mono- or polytheistic, and not also be able to believe in fairies. Unlike those other participants, however,

Melody actually *is* a believer in the Fairy world, so there's nothing theoretical in her take on the question of the compatibility of fairies with other religious worldviews.

### *The Banshee*

The banshee is a spirit whose purpose, most generally, is to herald someone's death. The name is an anglicized version of the Irish *bean sí* (or *bean sidhe*), although the terms *bean chaointe*, *bean nigh*, and *badhb* or *babha* are or were sometimes used instead (Lysaght 1986: 27-29), mostly in southeastern Ireland. These spirits are all heralds of death, but they are not always considered to be outright malicious in nature. Some stories describe a spirit that may be terrifying to people, but which ultimately seeks only to notify someone of her or his impending demise, as opposed to actually causing it.

It's probably not possible to know when the banshee entered the realm of Irish folk belief, but it has a mythological representation that is noted by Evans-Wentz (2003: 305-307) and Lysaght (1986: 194-195) in a discussion on the role the fairies are said to have played in the Battle of Clontarf, fought between Viking settlers from Dublin and their southeastern Irish allies against the Irish of the southeastern counties and the Irish High King Brian Boru. Aoibheall, a familiar fairy of the O'Brien lineage, is said in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century text *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* cited by the researchers to have appeared to Brian on the eve of battle, warning him of his impending death and discussing which of his sons should become the sovereign of Ireland after the king's demise.



Another source, *The Cattle-Raid of Froech*, cited by Lysaght (1986: 193), dates back to the eighth century, and includes a representation of wailing death spirits that more closely resemble the behavior of the archetypal banshee than *Aoibheall* does in the mythic version of a historical battle. As the protagonist *Froech mac Idaith* lays dying, a chorus of keening spirit women makes an appearance. He asks whose death they mourn, and is told it is his own. A key difference, however, between the archival information on banshees and this legend is that the banshee is known as a solitary figure, while the otherworldly chorus numbers 150 spirits. Lysaght states that this is probably a literary device to better represent the “nobility” of *Froech* (1986:194), whose mother is said to have been a noble figure from the Fairy world itself.

A common albeit not entirely universal trait of the classic banshee is its disconcerting wail, and it is this feature that serves as the source of the spirit’s alternate name of *bean chaointe* (Lysaght 1986:32-40.) *Chaointe* is derived from the word that became anglicized as “keening,” which in Ireland and Scotland often involved the recitation or singing of a chant or melody over the body of the deceased at a funeral, often by women. Without context, *bean chaointe* does not imply anything supernatural, and the term is the same as the one that would have been applied to the female mourners performing a “keen.” Another alternative name for the spirit is the *bean nigh* or “washer woman”, which like *bean chaointe* describes the spirit’s behavior -- in this case, washing the clothes of the soon to be deceased (Silver 1999: 172.)

*Bean sí* is nearly always translated as either “fairy woman” or “mound woman,” depending on which meaning of the word *sí/sidhe* is preferred (since this word can mean either the dwelling places of fairies or the fairies themselves.) Either translation still plants this being squarely in the realm of fairy lore... or so it would seem. While various researchers and other

writers who have written about fairy beliefs list the banshee among the fairy world's numbers (Evans-Wentz 2003, Lenihan 2004, Silver 1999, and Wilde 2006, Yeats 2003, to name a few), Lysaght asserts that there is little in either recorded folk tradition or among modern Irish stories and beliefs to back up the idea that the banshee has traditionally been seen as a true member of the same spirit world as are other fairies (1986: 43-46.)

My own sample of believers who spoke of the banshee agrees with the idea that the banshee is distinct from fairies, although of course my sample included only a handful of people compared to Lysaght's study. Pseudonyms are used in all cases. Minor narrative elements that do not affect the accuracy of the core data have been changed for privacy considerations.

#### Will and Nancy McDonagh, and the Passing of Will's Mother

It was just days before the end of my stay in Sligo when I had the opportunity to discuss this matter with the McDonaghs, both of whom are in their 50's and work in the vicinity of Sligo Town. Mr. Will McDonagh had grown up in County Sligo while Mrs. Nancy McDonagh had been raised on a farm in County Mayo, Sligo's southeastern neighbor. The two have resided in their current location for over 20 years. While we were talking, the subject of the banshee came up again, and he told me the story of his and his wife's encounter with the spirit some 20 years ago. It was the night of July 21st and the couple was at home in Sligo. His mother was on holiday in the southern county of Cork.

"There was this sense that we were in the presence of something. Whatever it was it was invisible and we couldn't really place its location. It didn't feel like it was inside the house, but

it was still aware of us and was focused on us. It was raining outside and there was wind. It seemed to come out of the sounds of those things, like it was a part of them, but then it took on a nature of its own and became more and more distinct. Eventually this sound just seemed to fill up the house, or, like it was echoing off of everything. It was upsetting but not so much that we couldn't keep our wits together. I don't remember how long it lasted but it wasn't very long and it just sort of trailed off eventually into nothing. It's very hard to describe the noise after it came out of the wind, because I've never heard anything else like it."

The next day, he received a phone call informing him that his mother had suffered a fatal stroke in Cork. The time of death was after the mysterious noise had invaded the McDonagh home, and the couple, neither of whom are convinced of fairies' existence but were raised to respect the power of the sacred Irish landscape, were sure that they had experienced nothing short of an encounter with a banshee seeking to foretell the elder Mrs. McDonagh's death.

Some features of note in this case:

1. To my knowledge, nobody in the vicinity of Will McDonagh's mother at the time of her stroke ever mentioned anything to him about banshees or unusual and disconcerting noises. The banshee instead foretold the death to Will, who was nowhere near Cork at the time.
2. The banshee is not identified as a fairy being in this account.
3. The banshee appeared before, not after, the death had occurred.
4. The banshee did not manifest visually.

5. The call of the banshee was not a piercing shriek or other jarring sound. It was instead an escalation of noise that seemed to come out of the ambient sounds of the weather outside, eventually filling up the house (or the bedroom at least) with its essence. Although the sound here does not bring to mind the song-like call of the banshee from some accounts (Evans-Wentz 2003: 81), it is perhaps closer to possessing a musical quality than the call of the banshee in the three sets of participant testimony on the subject in this thesis. Of the three testimonials on banshee encounters in this thesis, the McDonagh case is the only one involving a family line with a documented history of banshee encounters (see Point 6 below.) It's a stretch to say with the evidence on-hand that the McDonagh history of being warned of certain family members' deaths by a wailing banshee is related to the fact that the sound heard that night was distinctly less threatening than that in the next two stories I will present. However, it is a coincidence, and it should be compared against a larger study in the future on the question of whether or not certain families are more likely to report hearing a particular *type* of banshee call (frightful, melodic, etc) and if there is a particular reason for this.
6. The actual, non-pseudonymous family name of the individuals involved in the events of the night in question is that of a Connacht family line that Lysaght (1986: 259-282.) suggests has a history of encounters with the death-messenger. Although the family has roots in southern Ireland, apparently none of the friends, family members, or local residents near Mrs. McDonagh in Cork reported any unusual premonitions or events surrounding her death.

Additionally, while this family name may be associated with banshee visitations, this is the only one that I was made aware of by these particular individuals, and of course it is also possible that the name is shared by people only vaguely or even unrelated to each other by blood in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### Alan Grenham Hears the Banshee Twice on One Night

Alan Grenham, now in his late 50's, volunteers for a community center in Sligo Town on a fairly frequent basis. The center hosts all kinds of organizations, but much of the work Mr. Grenham, and the men's group he is a member of, has to do with educating local schoolchildren about matters from sustainable gardening to the history of Sligo Town in centuries past. Forty years ago, he was a young resident of what today forms the northernmost limits of the city's downtown area, but at the time was more sparsely developed. A cab driver, whose own banshee testimony will follow this account, referred me to Mr. Grenham the previous week, and said that he could "probably have a thing or two to help" with my research if I went to talk with him at the community center. Sure enough, this turned out to be true.

"I was 18 years old at the time, at a friend's house down at the bottom of the hill towards the bay. Back at that time most of the lights would be out by maybe two in the morning or so, so people who were out usually would be heading home soon after midnight." He went on to tell me about how apart from the practical benefit of having some light to guide your way home (this part of Ireland is pitch black on cloudy nights even today, with barely any ambient lights visible

at street level outside of the city, and some tracts of highway having nothing to illuminate them apart from headlights), some people still believed that “spirits” (Mr. Grenham’s phrase) became more active at night and were best avoided.

Mr. Grenham continued, “but that night I was playing cards with some friends and had not given a lot of thought as to when I should leave. The game continued well past midnight and that’s when we heard the banshee. It had a horrible cry; a little like a baby’s or a cat’s but more painful on the ears. It was terrible, like it was something unnatural. I don’t know of anything that sounds exactly like it. It came in through the windows and through the door, it seemed. It almost seemed like it had a weight to it, I guess you could say. Like you could feel it. It came in and swept through the house. It was come and gone very fast. We took it as a warning, and those of us who didn’t live at that house packed up and left right away. I don’t know what time it was then but everything was completely dark outside. Eventually those of us that’d left had gone as far as we could go together and headed to our own houses. I just kept walking towards home and didn’t dare look back down the road behind me. And then I heard the sound again. It came from somewhere in back of me and raced down the road in the direction I was walking. It came and went as fast as it had in the house. Same kind of sound. I ran as fast as I could and I still didn’t look back. To see the banshee’s eyes is to bring your death, you know. You never look it in the eyes. I remember hearing that from the older people as a boy. If you did she’d take you into the ocean or a bog and drown you, and you wouldn’t be able to resist. Well I made it back safe that night and I’ve never heard the banshee again, and I’ve never played cards after midnight again either.”

I asked Mr. Grenham if he had any thoughts or feelings about how people today see the banshee, and he gave a very interesting answer. “Well, people still believe in it. I do. It might still be around. It certainly *was*, years ago.”

In my other interviews I had never heard anything to the effect of “this once was here, but now it is not” said in reference to a supernatural force. Prompted for clarification, that was clearly what Mr. Grenham was saying, as opposed to “people used to *believe* in this, but now they don’t, or their children/grandchildren don’t.” Mr. Grenham did not say where he thought this banshee came from, or how large an area it might roam. He believes there are other banshees in Ireland in addition to this one but did not give an estimated number. He also said that he is aware of the banshee-as-death-herald tradition, but that the thing he encountered that fateful night was a closer match to the banshee in the stories he’d heard growing up.

Some features of note in this case:

1. The form the banshee took in the stories told to Mr. Grenham as he was growing up was not the death-herald from other Irish banshee traditions, but that of a malicious spirit; one that would entrance those who looked into its eyes and then lead them to their death. Growing up within a mile or two of Sligo Bay, the banshee tradition that Mr. Grenham and his local neighbors grew up with appears to share traits with the shape-shifting water horse found in folklore from across northern Europe such as the Scandinavian *nokk* (Kvideland and Sehmsdorf 1988: 257), and the Scottish Kelpie and Eich Uisge (Bennet 1997:95.) In these traditions, these often malevolent spirits either lure or simply drag people to their deaths in the bogs or sea. An examination of banshee accounts from those living on the coastlines of Ireland would, I feel, be a worthwhile undertaking for future research, to determine if the

banshee as a murderous being is a common motif along the coasts or in places with large bodies of standing water or bogs. I do not possess sufficient data or literary sources to speculate further on this matter at this time, but feel it is definitely something worth pursuing in the interests of future research into possible trends in banshee traditions across Ireland.

2. The banshee caused no physical harm to Mr. Grenham, but he believed that it could have, had he had looked in its direction and made eye contact. Although no physical harm came to him that night, the frightful sound associated with the thing frightened Mr. Grenham and several other young adults to the point that they felt they could be in danger. Consider this in contrast with the encounter that Mr. and Mrs. McDonagh say they had with their banshee, which was more generally unnerving and mysterious but not openly threatening.
3. Mr. Grenham, while clearly stating that the sound was something he had never heard before or since, also said that in a way it resembled the cry “of a baby or a cat.” Lysaght (1986: 74) talks about how female foxes, when mating, produce very high-pitched shrieks that can continue for long periods of time. The hypothesis is that some people may mistake this for the sound they believe a banshee would make, although she also presents (1986: 224) the logical skeptical position that those so confused by the sounds are confused because of their lack of exposure to the sounds of the outdoors. People living in rural Ireland today, and certainly those who worked the countryside generations ago, would be more familiar with the local animal noises. It may be possible that a vixen was responsible for the shriek heard on the road by Mr. Grenham, but it seems reasonable that if it was indeed a fox, then Mr.



Grenham would have heard the same sound again at some point in the 40 years that have passed since the banshee incident, and would have either described the sound like that of a fox instead of a baby or cat, or just discounted the original incident entirely as a case of being startled by sudden sounds in the dark of night.

4. It is Mr. Grenham's assessment that in his community 40 years ago, belief in spirits and a recommendation that people keep their distance from them was, if not common, at least not rare.
5. Mr. Grenham does not come from a family identified in the Lysaght study as one that is associated with a banshee, but the study does not by any means say that banshees are associated *only* with certain Irish families.

#### Sean Gayle Encounters the Banshee Outside of Sligo Town

Sean Gayle is a middle-aged cab driver who had grown up in one of the lightly built-up areas just west of Sligo Town. I only had a chance to speak with Mr. Gayle briefly as I rode in his cab back to Drumcliff one Sunday afternoon in July, having missed the last bus of the day. He was the person who advised me to seek out Mr. Alan Grenham, but he also had his own story to tell about the banshee.

Similar to every other person I talked with about fairy lore over the course of this research, Mr. Gayle gave no sign of having any reservations about answering my questions or giving me his opinions on other matters of Irish history and culture during the course of the conversation. While he shared the skepticism of other interviewees when it came to fairies, he believed he encountered a banshee. He told me this story:

“Fifteen years ago I still lived outside of the city. One night I was walking home from a friend’s house very late. Now it’s very dark that night. There weren’t really any lights on that road. My house was down at the other end of the street from his and when I was getting close was when I heard it. I believed in [the banshee] but I never knew anyone who’d met it before. I’d heard some stories from people who knew other people who say they heard it crying and that was all. But I really think that’s what it was that I heard that night. She sounded like I’d been told she sounded. The scream came from behind me. It came and was gone in a few seconds. I was nearly in front of my house when I heard it and I just bolted up the lawn towards the door. I looked over my shoulder a little as I was running onto the lawn but I didn’t see anything. When I got inside I just stood with my back to the door for a minute or two. It was very unsettling at the time. It didn’t sound like anything else I’ve ever heard really except maybe a little like a car that had the breaks slammed. It was painfully high-pitched, and there were no cars on the road, I’d have noticed *that*.”

We talked further about this, and Mr. Gayle said that he had “of course” heard about the more classic role of the banshee as a harbinger of death to those who would die of natural causes later. But the form of the banshee as a malevolent spirit that could entrance people and lead them to their doom was another thing he’d heard older family and neighbors talk about

sometimes. He didn't specifically mention that one could not look at its eyes, but rather that one should simply not look at it *at all* if possible. He said that when he glanced back over his shoulder it was an instinctive response to the sudden, jarring noise.

"It didn't occur to me to think "banshee" until afterwards", he said. Mr. Gayle pointed out that even though he had some trouble walking alone in the darkness for awhile after this event, he got over it soon enough and that it didn't cause him to reconsider anything about his behavior the way Mr. Grenham's banshee had. Mr. Gayle did, however, say that for awhile he drove instead of walked, even for a short distance to a house at the end of the road, if he thought he'd be out late. All these years after the incident, he believes that there is a very real possibility that the sound he'd heard had come from a banshee, but that he "wouldn't swear before God that [he] [knows] it for sure." We didn't go into too great detail about the broader subject of fairy lore, but he did briefly comment that he didn't really know anyone still alive who would believe in fairies the way his great grandparents' generation and those before it did.

Some features of note in this case:

1. The general details of this account are very similar to that of Mr. Grenham's. The banshee is a malevolent entity. Its call is a shriek, instead of the more drawn-out, richer sound of the McDonagh's banshee story. The encounter is said to have taken place on an unlit road late at night.
2. Similar to the other two cases, the participant giving this testimonial does not really believe in the existence of the classical mound-dwelling *Sí*, although they do accept other aspects of

Irish tradition such as the power of fairy forts and the existence of a spirit which they call the banshee.

3. Mr. Gayle, like Mr. Grenham, does not come from a family identified in the Lysaght study as being linked with banshee encounters.

#### *Some Final Observations on the Banshee*

In addition to these accounts, other project participants professed a degree of willingness to believe that the banshee might actually be real, but stated that they had never encountered it themselves. On two occasions that I noted, participants said they knew of people who had encountered the banshee, but apart from the general date around which it had happened they did not have any significant details. One woman, however, did say that she suspected the family of a recently deceased individual were rather superstitious, and may have been trying to recall any odd sight or sound in the days leading up to their loved one's death to attribute to the banshee, since they wanted very badly to believe that they had been given a proper warning by the spirit about the upcoming tragedy. I detected a tone of mild criticism of such beliefs in the person relating this story to me, but by and large no one I talked to about the banshee (or for the most part fairy lore in general) treated the subject as something believed in only by gullible, superstitious, or hopelessly old-fashioned people.

While my sample included only a handful of cases, I find it interesting that it was only the couple whose name had a documented history of being associated with banshee encounters experienced what might be considered the classic sort of encounter: the unnerving, otherworldly, mournful sound of a banshee foretelling the death of a blood relative.

Another interesting aspect about the Gayle and Grenham incidents are how the individuals involved became quite terrified, if only until reaching the safety of their homes, by what they considered to be the banshee's call. While anyone who believes in the banshee would probably be upset to hear it, due to its association with death, there is little published evidence (Lysaght 1986: 144-145) of people believing that hearing the banshee bodes badly for them personally. More often, the person destined to die cannot hear it her or himself. But the spirit/s Mr. Gayle and Grenham believe they encountered were thought to have hostile intentions, and the screech could have been meant either as a warning or as a means of attracting the individuals' attention -- presumably so the spirit could then drag them out to Sligo Bay and drown them, as the local lore they grew up with said would happen.

This chapter has presented key information about the project participants and their degree of religiosity in general and where they stand vis-a-vis fairies, and examined participant testimony and other thoughts on aspects of a fairy world and the more specific case of the enigmatic banshee spirit. Chapter 3 will discuss in more detail the matter of fairy forts, and key archetypes of both fort construction/vegetation and local custom from the project area.

### CHAPTER 3: FAIRY FORTS AND BUSHES IN MODERN SLIGO

In 1999 in the town of Newmarket-on-Fergus in Co. Clare, Ireland, work crews debated the best course of action to deal with a fairy hawthorn growing on the proposed route of a new road. Some area locals (how many is unknown) believed the bush to harbor things better left undamaged by human development. At the forefront of a movement to preserve the fairy bush was Mr. Eddie Lenihan, author, folklorist, and a *seanchaí* or traditional Irish storyteller. In a *New York Times* article by James F. Clarity, Lenihan made a brief yet poignant summation of the condition of many Irish peoples' belief in fairies:

*People in Ireland, Mr. Lenihan said, say they don't believe the old tales of the fairies and their shoemakers, the leprechauns.*

*"They laugh at you," he said, standing beside the gnarled gray trunk of the 15-foot-high bush.*

*"It's not sophisticated. But subconsciously, they believe."*

(Clarity 1999)

As I hope was indicated in Table 6A in Chapter 2, finding those who profess a belief in fairies themselves is a great deal harder than finding those ready to attribute the presence of a nebulous sort of supernatural or unexplainable power to fairy forts and bushes. This chapter will analyze the fairy forts without the direct link to traditional fairy beliefs, based on photographic evidence and participant input from the project area.

### *A Brief, General History of Irish Ring and “Fairy” Forts*

Fairy forts, some of which are referred to as a *Rath* (fort) or *Dún* (mound) in modern place-names, appear in folklore as entrances to the world of Fairy and its spirit denizens. Depending on the folklore source, these spirits may be seen as those of the Tuatha de Danaan (Briggs 2002:148), the legendary, magical inhabitants of Ireland who preceded the Milesian Celts in the Irish mythological cycle. This does not have to be the case, however, since the notions of what a fairy being actually *is* and where it came from can vary from believer to believer.

In an anthropological context, the forts are a sacred parts of the Celtic landscape from, at the very least, the end of the post-medieval period onwards (1700 A.D. to present), and possibly earlier. They take a number of shapes, as the photographs on the coming pages will show, but their common characteristic appear in each of these examples to be the presence of thorn bushes or thorn trees on a raised mound of earth. A fort may be natural, human-made, or in the cases presented in this chapter, a mix of both.

Some of the fairy forts are the remains of ring forts, the most plentiful field monument in Sligo (Alcock and Tunney 1995: 270.) Built until at least 1100 A.D. and some being repurposed later as burial sites, the ruins of the forts (and other stone structures), it could be hypothesized, eventually entered the oral narrative of the local folklore and a fairy presence was attributed to the sites at that time or shortly thereafter.

A ring fort is a circular defensive enclosure also used as a living space. Passageways beneath the mound that the fort would have been built upon could contain storage caches and an escape path. Although the term “fort” implies a military defense, these early Medieval structures

in Ireland were actually a place for an extended family to live and keep their livestock, protected by a deep ditch surrounding a walled-off area of high ground, underneath which was located a series of passageways to food caches and escape routes (Edwards in O Croinin 2005: 297.)

There are hundreds of prehistoric stone structures, and thousands of “Early” to “Post-Medieval” (400-1100 A.D., and 1100-1700 A.D.) structures known to exist in County Sligo alone (Alcock and Tunney 1995: 270) and the true number is almost certainly higher. Many ruins can simply be overgrown, and as I noticed in my foot travels through the local highlands there are ruined remains of stone walls or other structures tucked into places which are now quite isolated from any other human development. Who knows how many such ruins are unaccounted for, and absent from any official lists. It should be noted that the designation of a site as a fairy fort is a local form of recognition only. The term does not appear as a category of archaeological site on the Archaeological Survey of Sligo’s list.

The exact process by which ruins came to be identified as belonging to the fairy folk is uncertain, but some old ring forts were repurposed as burial places centuries after they fell out of use as farm houses. Ring forts that have been eroded and overgrown bear a resemblance to barrow mounds, so people may have utilized the old forts as burial places, thinking that was what the site had been all along. Evans-Wentz acknowledges that some people believe fairies to be the spirits of departed mortals (Evans Wentz 2003: 45), so if a “fort” came to be associated with burials it is not a stretch to say that it would then become associated with fairies as a matter of course. But not all fairy forts contain known burials, so this cannot account for the origin of every thorn bush and mound in Ireland identified with the fairies. Some individuals will, however, associate *every* fort with the dead anyway, to be on the safe side, and as such show



respect to any fort they encounter (Waters Interview, August 2008.) Misfortune is said to befall those who damage or disrespect the sanctity of a fairy fort (Evans-Wentz 2003: 33.)

This chapter will describe a sample of fairy forts I encountered during my field research. Each of these encounters occurred while in the company of the landowner and/or a member of a Sligo government organization, acting in an unofficial capacity only. It should be noted that there is no in-depth archaeological component to the examination of these forts. It is difficult enough, for Irish archaeologists to receive permission to excavate a structure locally known as a fort, due both to local pressure and legal regulations governing such work at any site. My intent with visiting these forts was primarily to get a firsthand visual of what shapes the forts took, but also to converse with the owner of the property on their beliefs about the fairy world, or in fairy fort taboos. Unless otherwise noted each fort is named after the owner of the property it sits on, and do not have any official name on the map of Sligo ruins, if the fort appears on the map at all.

### *Fairy Fort Examples in the Project Area*

#### The Keaney Fort, Urlar, Drumcliff

It was early July of 2008 when I made a concerted effort to see the old stonework at the heart of the fairy fort situated at the back end of Frank and Una Keaney's property. I had been renting the guest flat at the Keaney's for a little over three weeks at this point, and I had been shown the fort by Mr. Keaney several days prior.

Because I could not get a high enough vantage point from the surrounding terrain or with a ladder, I attempted to simply wade through the fort's surrounding vegetation itself, a thick overgrowth of nettles. After several attempts to find a way in through the thorns from different directions at the cost of numerous cuts and pierces to my legs and abdomen (through multiple layers of clothing), I came to the conclusion that there was no way into the center of the thick vegetation without physically removing branches. Even from the higher vantage point of the ladder the stones were still obscured by the plant life growing over them. Removing the branches in order to gain access to the stones would never have been condoned by Frank, nor by anyone else wary of the powers that they believe the many fairy forts of Sligo possess. In the end there would be no photographs of the stones to be had, but the data I did collect is still sufficient for the purposes of comparing it with other forts found in the project area.

The Keaney fort is located at the highest point of the seven acre plot of property. It abuts two other properties immediately to its north and east. It was in this area that Frank had originally wanted the house to be built, not knowing that the mound of thorns at the extreme edge of the property was considered to be a "fort." He was made aware of this information by the construction company, who refused to build over it. The house was subsequently built at the front of the property instead.

The Keaney fort is characterized by an overgrowth of evergreens and nettles amidst a small field of tall grasses. As noted, there is a small group of old stones in the middle, but these are only visible when the foliage thins in winter. A person cannot walk across or through this fort due to the thickness of the overgrowth, which contrasts with the sparser plant life of some of the other forts that I will describe in the following pages. The stones may have once been part of

a larger structure. While the Keaney's regularly maintain the majority of their multi-acre property with a lawnmower and sheers, they have left the plants on the fort alone since moving in over three decades ago.



*Figure 1: Image of Frank Keaney in front of the Keaney fort's southern side.*

Photo © Brian Tillesen 2008

The fort's outer vegetation is illustrated by the orange line. The "fairy-haunted" slopes of Ben Bulbin, to use a phrase by Evans-Wentz (Evans-Wentz 2003 : 237), at the western edge of

the Dartry Range can be seen in the space between the fort and the tree on the left, and can be scaled in a couple of hours if traveling on foot from the Keaney residence.

### The Greene Fort, Farmland near the Dartry Mountains, Drumcliff

This fort, located on the Greene family's farm along the south-facing slopes of the Dartry Mountains, consists of an earthen mound and a stone portal topped with Blackthorns, a tree associated with fairy lore as being the home of the Lunantishee. This type of fairy is said to be particularly active on May 11 and November 11, when, according to folklore, it will visit misfortune upon any who cut branches from the Blackthorn (Evans-Wentz 2003 Edition: 53.) While many trees were once associated with a particular type of fairy, thorn trees in general were a universal feature of all the forts I visited during my fieldwork period. I am told, as the literature of Irish folk tradition also states, that injury or death is likely to come from damaging any part of a fairy fort at any time, even accidentally.

The stone portal at the Greene's fort is probably the entrance to a passage leading under the associated earthen mound. Such a passage could lead to either the remains of a barrow or storage cache, assuming the mound is part of the remains of a barrow or fortified farmstead / ring fort. This is just speculation however, since the documentation of the Greene's fort in the record would be limited to a small mark on the Sligo Heritage Council's Special Protection Area map for the zone the property sits on. No archaeologist or technician has ever excavated the mound or subjected it to ground-penetrating radar as far as I have been able to determine. However, the portal itself, if one peers into it with a light, is obstructed by more stones. So it could also be that



this small hideaway is the only human construction at this “fort”, and that there is no passageway leading further into the mound. Only archaeological work would tell for sure, but such a thing isn’t likely to be forthcoming if it involves intruding on the interior of the mound.



*Figure 2: Stonework at the Greene fort, west-facing side.*

Photo © Brian Tillesen 2008

Much of the earthen mound component in Figure 2 is visible behind the blackthorns, and the portal entrance is located at the bottom of the stonework in the foreground. It leads under the blackthorn on the right.



*Figure 3: View of the Greene fort portal entrance.*

Photo © Brian Tillesen 2008



The stone obstruction inside the portal has been highlighted with Adobe Photoshop's adjustment tools, to make it stand out in this image and give the viewer a better idea of how far back the portal entrance extends before becoming obstructed (about one meter.) The small white rod inside the chamber is a camera artifact from the original digital image.



*Figure 4: Thorns on the east-facing side of the Greene fort over the portal.*

Photo © Brian Tillesen 2008

The portal entrance runs under the blackthorn tree on the left. The individuals in this picture, from left to right are Mr. Meehan, Mr. Greene (with infant son partially obstructed from view), and Mr. Waters. Noel Meehan and Seamus Waters work for the County Council's Central Statistics Office and Roads departments respectively, and were invaluable in my fairy fort research in the Drumcliff area, both in providing me with their own thoughts and beliefs on the subject and for connecting me with other residents who were willing to do the same.

#### The Meehan Fort, Urlar, Drumcliff

The Meehan fort differs from the Greene fort in that it is difficult to identify from its shape alone. It is quite flat and covered in uncut grass, with thorn trees lining its outer perimeter instead of sitting conspicuously over stonework or atop the fort's highest point. The electric fencing, designed to keep people and livestock out of the fort's boundaries, is also absent at the Greene fort. The Greene family's cows, by contrast, graze on grass growing on the fort.

Mr. Meehan informed me that there is a human-made component of his fort, which can be seen between the lefthand and center stands of thorns in Figure 5. It is a long, low wall of earth and stone, which once made up an old property boundary or livestock pen of unknown age.





*Figure 5: Southwestwardly view of the field on which the Meehan fort is located.*

Photo © Brian Tillesen 2008

This fort is less conspicuous than the others in this sample because of how flat most of the off-limits area is. The remnants of the fort's low wall, now overgrown, are seen between the tree in the left foreground and the stand of trees in the middle of the image.





*Figure 6: North side of the fort's outer boundary, showing electric wire barrier.*

Photo © Brian Tillesen 2008

Fort on the Outskirts of Drumcliff, Highway N15 Heading Towards Grange

I was shown this fort while en route to the home of Mr. Mark Keane of the Sligo Heritage Office, an individual with considerable knowledge of both fairy lore and Irish archaeology. Like the Keaney fort, it is a tangle of low, dense thorns, but the stone-work present at this fort is much more apparent, and unlike the Keaney fort is located around the outside of the site as well.



*Figure 7: Picture of the Roadside fort, facing the northeast.*

Photo © Brian Tillesen 2008

The cows in this image give a good idea of the substantial size of this fort. While the Meehan fort is larger in overall area, this one is considerably taller, and has more extensive stonework associated with it than does the Keaney fort.



Fairymount, near Lissadell House, Ballinfull

This mysterious structure is of more substantial scale than the Greene, Meehan, or Keaney forts. This image was taken from the intersection of the public road and the property's boundary. This structure is labeled only as a "mound" on a county road plan map, however the name Fairymount is what appears on the Proposed Special Protection Area map (Drumcliff Bay SPA Sitecode 004013 May 2005), and it is the only fort in this sample to be listed by name on that or any other SPA map.



*Figure 8: Fairymount, southern side.*

Photo © Brian Tillesen 2008

### *The Need for a Fairy Fort Location and Composition Matrix*

Each of the fairy forts (and the Fairymount) that have been used in this sample illustrate distinct physical characteristics. The Meehan, Greene, and Keaney forts, all of which are associated with on-site interviews with their owners, also illustrate different cultural traits associated with fairy fort beliefs. The following tables will illustrate this. The categories that I offer for these examples are for generally categorizing the physical types of forts, and do not take into account the place of the fort in the local cultural landscape. Not every person who believes the forts have some kind of power agrees upon just what that power actually is, or what kind of action may cause it to target someone for misfortune, and so there is no efficient or useful way to describe these features in this format.

To my knowledge, there is no system yet devised that can be used to broadly organize the types of fairy forts present in Ireland in the form of a graphical representation. If this is the case, the application of this system to both preexisting and future physical descriptions of the forts may be useful in documenting the frequency of each fort type within an area, and may even serve to identify whether or not particular beliefs about forts and either fairy or non-specific supernatural powers can be linked with particular physical fort archetypes.

Further data collection along with the application of this system not only in the vicinity of Sligo Town but across other parts of Ireland will be needed. I offer the following method of cataloguing forts, and while it will require refinements as the body of data grows, I do not know of any other system such as this available for the systematic classification and cataloguing of forts at all, let alone in support of analyzing trends as described below Table 8.

*Table 8: Major Elements of Fort Location and Composition*

Fairy Fort Location and Composition Matrix										
Fort Label	Central Stones	Stone Ring	Scattered Stones	Intact Structure	Ruined Structure	Raised Epicenter	Flat	Varied Topography	Associated Thorny Flora	Other Flora
Keaney	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Meehan	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Greene	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Roadside	Unclear	Yes	No	No	Unclear	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Fairymount	No	No	Unclear	No	Unclear	Yes	No	No	Yes	Unclear

An explanation of these terms is needed of course. The operative definitions I am assigning to each term are by design quite generic. Any fort that is examined by a researcher can be added to this table to produce a database of the major elements of any given sample set of forts. These entries cannot stand alone, of course. Each one must serve as a supplement to a write-up of data that describes at the very least what the prevailing and dissenting local opinions are on what power, if any, the fort has.

The database can be utilized to identify trends in physical characteristics throughout a particular area or region, but the data write-ups associated with each entry are required not only to further our understanding of local traditions, but to contrast with the database to see whether or not trends in the cultural aspects of the forts can be tied to trends in the physical aspects of them.

The excavation-free visual survey needed before entering a yes, no, or unclear entry into the table does not take known or suspected archaeological information about the site into account except in the most superficial of ways. This is not by any means to say that archaeological study of these sites is not valuable. However, I believe the fort classification system that I have

outlined will better serve the interests of the field of cultural anthropology in its mission of understanding the local, regional, and national significance of the forts as sacred or taboo sites in the present day, irrespective of what archaeological or historical data lays beneath it (if any.)

The explanations and short forms of each term are listed below:

**Stones at Center:** There are stones in a state of disarray at the center of the fort. What these stones may have once been a part of cannot be determined from a surface evaluation of the site.

**Stone Ring:** A ring of stones is apparent around or within the fort. This ring does not have to be a complete, intact circle as long as it is apparent that it once was a circular or semi-circular construct.

**Associated Stones:** Stonework in a state of disarray is present on-site, but is either located away from the epicenter from the fort, or is present in multiple deposits scattered around the site.

**Associated Mound:** A mound is present on-site, but does not form the apparent epicenter of the fort.

**Intact or Semi-Intact Structure:** Some sort of construct is present on-site. It may be in a fully intact or semi-ruined state, but cannot be a mere scatter of miscellaneous stones. The construct may be a portal to a cache or barrow, a wall of a now-ruined structure, or any other stone structure apart from a stone ring.

**Raised Epicenter:** The high point of this fort is at the epicenter. Surrounding topography is not taken into account, so the fort itself does not have to be the highest point of the local terrain.

**Flat:** The fort is nearly or completely flat, apart from trees or stones that are also present on-site.

**Varied Topography:** The fort does not have a high point at its epicenter, nor is it flat.

**Thorns:** Even though thorny flora is extremely common on fairy forts, as noted above, no researcher has ever systematically catalogued a large database of Irish forts, let alone one identifying the frequency of thorns across the whole body of data. Forts *lacking* thorns should be annotated, and if they prove to be as anomalous as the body of current information indicates, the reason for thorn-free forts (especially if large numbers of them are located in particular localities) should be pursued in future studies.

In this chapter I have presented a sample of fairy forts from the research area. While future research and the expansion in the number of both project participants and fort descriptions is necessary in order to further refine the assumptions made from the data presented, I believe that the current data illustrates that there are, at the heart of the modern Irish worldview in this part of the country, specific archetypes of belief, despite the fact that individuals alive today have not inherited these beliefs with the level of conviction of those generations now past.



## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the sample of participants used in this study, it appears overwhelmingly apparent that traditional belief in fairies is rare, but that despite this the fairy forts, so numerous throughout the landscape, continue to influence how people interact with their landscape and the energies some believe exist there. That such energies exist, mysterious, unknowable, even dangerous as they may be, is accepted almost universally among the participants in this project. Frank Keaney didn't build his home on the front end of his multi-acre plot of land simply because he wanted to preserve the fort at the back end; he did so because the architect wasn't willing to build it any closer and Mr. Keaney, who at the time was unaware that the mound at the back of the lot was considered a fort, concurred with this construction assessment once made aware of the fort's presence. The home was constructed 30 years ago, but even today the fort and all the vegetation surrounding it remain uncut: a stark difference with the immaculately maintained landscape that makes up the rest of the Keaney property.

While the taboo against interacting with flora on the forts is believed to varying degrees, with some individuals not only opting not to pick up fallen branches or other wayward plant matter but to cordon off the fort with electric wire to stop livestock from accessing the fort's plants as well, the floral aspect plays some part in all of the fairy fort customs that I spoke with people about. While the spot that the fort occupies is revered as a whole and includes whatever old stonework is present on the site, all the forts I had seen had included plant life within the boundaries of the site as well. And yet, while several project participants were of the opinion that fort density in Sligo may be the highest in western Ireland if not the whole of Ireland, I saw only one bush standing independently of any apparent fort that I knew was identified locally as a

fairy bush. There is insufficient data to suggest the ratio of fairy plants to fairy forts encountered during my project is indicative of the ratio of these sites across Sligo or across Ireland, since the grand total of such sites is unknown. A more comprehensive study of fairy forts across Ireland is needed to determine this, and other intercounty or interregional trends and traditions.

### *A Note on Taboo*

I think that Theodor Gaster's notes on taboo in *The New Golden Bough* (Frazer 1959:214) should be discussed here as they pertain to my findings. Despite the lack of specific spirituality associated with the forts, the fort/tree taboo in practice in Sligo appears at its core to follow the lines of a taboo imposed "for the benefit of the object" (1959: 214)... and yet also that imposed for the protection of the individual. However, the protection of the individual does not, as far as I can tell, have a practical basis that could stand on its own as a reasoning for the taboo. What I mean by this is that intruding on the forts does not seem to put a person at any elevated risk of encountering poisonous plants or animals, nor does it put them at any particular risk of injury since the forts do not seem to occur on inherently dangerous terrain; so essentially there is no material or physical reason to be wary of forts or sacred bushes. There are various plants that are poisonous in whole or in part to consume that grow in Ireland, but they are not common features of the forts, thus effectively ruling out that reason for creating a taboo. There are insects and spiders in Ireland that may be harmful to those with allergies, but again these are not confined to the forts. The whole rationale for the taboo as it relates to the individual appears to be based around supernatural elements. That said, the traditionally ascribed sacred value to

different trees and other plants discussed by Pennick, Evans-Wentz, and others clearly illustrates a potential origin of the taboo as a means of protecting the sacred object itself from damage because of its power. The added protection to the object posed by peoples' fear of personal harm from mysterious forces should they interact with the site in the wrong way would neatly tie the concepts of individual and object protection through taboo together in theory... but in this case the taboo has survived the death of the religious tradition. The old woodland cults who worshipped the spirits of the trees do not exist anymore in Ireland, and fairies aren't believed by most to exist, so the theories on the origin of sacred floral sites (including fairy forts with stonework, as these apparently always have associated flora) presented in the introductory chapter do not fully explain why these sites continued to be seen as nominally sacred, if not also taboo, locations by people lacking such religious beliefs. I believe the answer can be found in further study of generalized personal spirituality as a distinct concept unto itself with its own attempts at explaining the supernatural, and not as something that is merely a detached indifference to dogmatic religion.

### *A Note on Religiosity*

Most of my project participants saw the decline in observant Christianity (noticeable to them even as Ireland remains among the most observant of Western European nations) and a decline in old fairy beliefs as stemming from the same series of things: the spread of public education after the founding of the Republic, growing industrial and commercial ventures and resulting changes to residential patterns (thus moving people away from their home communities

where particular traditional beliefs were entrenched), and the exposure to mass media both from within and outside of Ireland's own borders and culture have all been given as catalysts for this. I did not get the impression that people wanted to push back against this ongoing series of changes, and even those who self-identified as church-attending Catholics did not exactly lament (at least not to me) the decline in dogmatic religiosity that they saw taking place. But I'm not convinced that the shift in focus from fairy power to a vague and generalized supernatural power should really be called a decline when considering the fairy forts of Ireland. When people, even those not yet 40 years old in some cases, dare not harm the forts not out of concern merely for the forts' historical significance or aesthetic values, but out of concern for their own personal safety (even their very life), the high degree of importance of the forts in Irish culture are clear. The source of the forts' power is reflected in a gradually changing naming scheme however. While many people still use the term *fairy fort*, others drop the word fairy and just call them *forts*, and I was told that others may use the term fairy fort regardless of what if anything they believe resides there, be it a "power" or fairies themselves.

Finally, the banshee study yielded some surprising results. I was not as well versed in recent literature on the banshee when I started my fieldwork as I am now. The subject was not originally one that I thought would yield results in terms of detailed personal accounts of interaction with the spirit. However, we see that out of a sample of only 62, four people (three separate accounts, discussed in Chapter 2) claim to have been in the presence of it (one individual on two separate occasions, on the same night no less.) On top of these cases, there are other project participants who believe that the banshee is real even though they themselves have not had a firsthand experience with it. The pronoun *it*, instead of *her*, was very common in the

accounts. The testimony in Chapter 2 is not reported verbatim, although I did take the pronoun issue into consideration while writing my field notes. The use of the *it* pronoun with such frequency seemed somewhat odd even then, since the banshee is always female in its most familiar, classic form.

### *Future Research Directions*

The results of any part of this study would be enhanced by data from a larger sample. Similarly, any part of this study could be recreated in any part of Ireland with any sample size, supposing that someone wanted to assess the local prevalence of belief in fairies, lore of the banshee, or the current customs and beliefs surrounding fairy forts. Various ideas on future research are found in this thesis, but distilled generally they fall under the two categories of fairy forts and banshee beliefs, and these research directions are outlined below.

However, there are also more specific research objectives that I feel are worth exploring. The generalizing of spirituality is at the core of some of these objectives. The issue with how the banshee is personified, or the degree to which it is still personified, is worth investigating. I believe that the data presented, at least locally, indicates that people still believe there are very real and potentially very serious forces once attributed to fairies and other spirits that exist in the world (or at least in Ireland.) The banshee, a specific type of spirit with some specific motives, appears to be more commonly believed in than “fairies” in general, and while it has taken the form of a woman in the literature, in my study the spirit was hardly ever referred to as *she* (*it* was the preferred pronoun, including most of those who were aware of the tradition but did not

believe the banshee to be real.) Lysaght's 1986 study involved several methods including the distribution questionnaires, and showed that the impersonal nature of the questionnaire had the potential to bring in a lot of responses on the subjects of interest from people who may have otherwise been hesitant to be open and detailed with their answers. I think a questionnaire-based survey of peoples' attitudes about the banshee's gender identity or its level of personification in general, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, could help to confirm my suspicion that the banshee, similar to the source of the fairy forts' power, is becoming a more general concept in an Ireland where spirituality has for some become less rigid.

The Gillighan's World fairy park, as a nexus of Irish natural and cultural history, fairy tradition, commercially produced toys and statues of fairies and magical things (scattered around the walkways in the park for the childrens' entertainment), tourism, and actual belief in the Fairy world, all situated at the foot of a mountain named for these spirits holds, I believe, considerable value as a site of future research. This is true as much for gathering information from local residents, with whom I was unable to speak during my limited time away from Sligo and Drumcliff, as it is for gathering data from the visitors to the park themselves. What interest does the Fairy world and this park hold for these visitors? Are they all there for the peace and quiet, are they there out of curiosity, or are they going there with something more spiritual in mind? These general questions may form a basis for future research and specific study questions that can and should be asked.

Finally, a broad survey and cataloguing of fairy forts as a distinct cultural feature irrespective of archaeological context is badly needed, in my opinion. Fort density should be mapped, and physical descriptions of the forts taken to track trends in changing shapes and

components throughout the island. As described in Chapter 3 by Table 8, a cultural research component would have to accompany this mapping survey, to identify trends peoples' opinions and beliefs regarding taboos, traditions, other customs, and associated risks with forts, and whether or not these trends correspond to some physical or geographic trend with the forts themselves. Geographic Information System (GIS) technology can and should be used to annotate fairy forts on a digital database as well. The Sligo County Council already utilizes GIS for maintaining a variety of databases, including the location of thatched cottages, burial grounds, and protected structures (Sligo County Council 2006), so the infrastructure is in place to begin tracking Sligo's fairy forts already.

### *Summary and Theoretical Implications*

A prevailing lack of belief in fairies among the project participants is clear from the testimony and hard numbers collected and discussed. It is agreed by most in this research, however that powerful and possibly even deadly forces exist in or around fairy forts and sometimes fairy thorns or bushes (absent a corresponding fort structure.) While fairies themselves were once believed by many to be the agents of a fort's influence on people, they have been supplanted by this vague power in the minds of most of those who believe the forts to be powerful. A majority of participants in this research are also believers in the Christian God, and have not adopted a more general "life force" view of divinity to replace that figure. A more nebulous sense of the spiritual and the divine is becoming more popular in Western Europe, and perhaps in time a common cause could be pointed to with more authority for both this and the

generalization of the powers of the fairy forts. The banshee, a more precisely defined figure to begin with than the diverse array of other fairy spirits in Irish tradition, still appears to be believed in quite strongly, at least by some.

If indeed the generalization of both theism and the animism and animatism of Irish folk religion are linked to the common source of modernization, we should be able to see a similar corresponding generalization between the prevailing theistic faith and surviving folk religious traditions elsewhere in the world where a high quality of living is now the norm. The fact that the banshee remains a viable belief in Ireland despite the decline in other beliefs regarding spirits is interesting. I believe that in other parts of the world that are undergoing such generalizations of both folk religion and a major theistic religion such as Christianity, specific instances of spirit beings once part and parcel to the old supernatural worldview will remain visible within the cultural landscape. Because the banshee is already a niche figure serving a small set of roles within its respective spiritual tradition, it could be that the more specifically defined a particular supernatural figure is, the more resistant it is to changes in frequency or degree of belief elsewhere in that culture. Because so many countries of the world now see compulsory general education, scientific understanding, personal mobility, and long-distance communication of ideas to be laudable things, and it is these same things that so many of my project participants attribute to the decline in religious observation, there should be ample opportunity to study the mechanisms of present-day trends in spiritual worldviews both in Ireland and across the developed and developing world.



## **APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL NOTICE FOR RESEARCH**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
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[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Notice of Expedited Initial Review and Approval

From : **UCF Institutional Review Board**  
**FWA00000351, Exp. 5/07/10, IRB00001138**

To : **Brian Tillesen**

Date : **June 12, 2008**

IRB Number: **SBE-08-05696**

Study Title: **The Fairy Faith in Coastal Sligo**

Dear Researcher:

Your research protocol noted above was approved by **expedited** review by the UCF IRB Chair on 6/12/2008. **The expiration date is 6/11/2009.** Your study was determined to be minimal risk for human subjects and expeditable per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.110. The categories for which this study qualifies as expeditable research are as follows:

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The IRB has approved a **consent procedure which requires participants to sign consent forms.** Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Subjects or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

All data, which may include signed consent form documents, must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

To continue this research beyond the expiration date, a Continuing Review Form must be submitted 2 – 4 weeks prior to the expiration date. Advise the IRB if you receive a subpoena for the release of this information, or if a breach of confidentiality occurs. Also report any unanticipated problems or serious adverse events (within 5 working days). Do not make changes to the protocol methodology or consent form before obtaining IRB approval. Changes can be submitted for IRB review using the Addendum/Modification Request Form. An Addendum/Modification Request Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <http://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

**Failure to provide a continuing review report could lead to study suspension, a loss of funding and/or publication possibilities, or reporting of noncompliance to sponsors or funding agencies.** The IRB maintains the authority under 45 CFR 46.110(e) to observe or have a third party observe the consent process and the research.

On behalf of Tracy Dietz, Ph.D., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 06/12/2008 03:37:25 PM EDT

IRB Coordinator

## **APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL FOR CONTINUING RESEARCH**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901, 407-882-2012 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

## EXPEDITED CONTINUING REVIEW APPROVAL NOTICE

From : UCF Institutional Review Board  
FWA00000351, Exp. 10/8/11, IRB00001138

To : Brian Tillesen

Date : May 26, 2009

IRB Number: SBE-08-05696

Study Title: The Fairy Faith in Coastal Sligo

Dear Researcher,

This letter serves to notify you that the continuing review application for the above study was reviewed and approved by the IRB designated reviewer on 5/26/2009 through the expedited review process according to 45 CFR 46 (and/or 21 CFR 50/56 if FDA-regulated).

**Continuation of this study has been approved for a one-year period. The expiration date is 5/25/2010.** This study was determined to be no more than minimal risk and the category for which this study qualified for expedited review is:

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Subjects or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

All data must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

To continue this research beyond the expiration date, a Continuing Review Form must be submitted 2 – 4 weeks prior to the expiration date. Use the Unanticipated Problem Report Form or the Serious Adverse Event Form (within 5 working days of event or knowledge of event) to report problems or events to the IRB. Do not make changes to the study (i.e., protocol methodology, consent form, personnel, site, etc.) before obtaining IRB approval. Changes can be submitted for IRB review using the Addendum/Modification Request Form. An Addendum/Modification Request Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <https://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

On behalf of Tracy Dietz, Ph.D., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Janice Turchin on 05/26/2009 09:39:14 AM EDT

IRB Coordinator

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